

Relying on the Constitution is not enough

For Dalits, the institution has become synonymous with a grievance cell offering no immediate solutions



SURAJ YENGDE

Caste plays an important role in every facet of life, writes Suraj Yengde, a first-generation Dalit scholar, in his latest book, Caste Matters. Mr. Yengde grew up in dire circumstances in a family where the “education level did not go beyond tenth grade”. He talks about everyday humiliations and about the resilience of Dalits. Mr. Yengde questions Brahminical power as also divisions within the Dalit community, the legacy of Ambedkar, and explains why Dalits must lay claim to power. An excerpt:

The Dalit movement in India is yet to be fully formed with a sizeable consensus. It lives in various forms, sizes and shapes. It has not yet formulated a cogent programme to take in politically conservative Dalits by bringing them into the wider Indian democratic experience. Dalit scholars and politicians alike can be seen struggling to formulate a workable theory of Ambedkarism or Dalitism that would be a manifesto for common liberation.

By exclusively relying on constitutionalism as a means of emancipation, this class of intellectuals argues for a utopian dream. The methods of attaining Dalit emancipation, however, remain unknown. The sooner India's oppressed realise this, the better. One cannot depend on the limited conceptions of constitutionalism for deliverance. Owing to the limited control of this institution, the Constitution has become synonymous to a grievance cell offering no immediate solutions.

Limited reach

The linguistic accessibility of the Constitution and its reach to the oppressed is extremely limited. Few peasants would consider the Constitution as a written word that would guarantee them protection from the landlord's real and financial whipcord. Similarly, beggars who are living on the mercy of donors' charity would think that this dossier guarantees them equality and access to freedom. The idea of the Constitution is

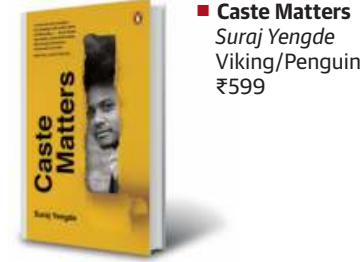


MEETA AHLAWAT

romantic. No one really knows its limitations but lauds its profundity without testing it out. Many Dalits are repeating the state's narrative of constitutionalism as being the ultimate virtue – a god-sent panacea. It does nothing more than apply a lotion to massage one's shattered ego. But when it comes to exercising the enshrined codes in the Constitution, Dalits seem to be harming their self-worth. This is because not everybody feels this document is close to their hearts as much as Dalits. Not everyone has similar expectations from the Constitution. Thus, it creates genuine gaps while considering constitutional morality as a common virtue. Hence, in such a situation of one-sided applicability, mutual cohabitation is a long shot. One has to pierce through the devious agenda of casteist rogues by injecting a radical antidote to set a tone of mutuality and respectability. Unless this is settled, no further conversation can be foreseen that will yield real results.

Second-class citizens

As much as Dalits feel empowered in a constitutionally mandated democratic republic, any hope of their issues being redressed withers away when reality comes knocking. After every gruesome atrocity or everyday humiliation they undergo at the workplace or in their shared housing, the promise of constitutionalism shatters into pieces. Dalits are often accorded second-class citizenship. At the workplace, they do not get the requisite respect and attention from



■ Caste Matters
Suraj Yengde
Viking/Penguin
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their co-workers. A senior bureaucrat friend, Tushar (pseudonym), who has an advanced degree from an Ivy League school, told me about his unpleasant experience. Prior to his departure to America, he was given a heavy workload with additional responsibilities by his immediate dominant caste supervisors. Tushar narrated the story of how he was tasked to work on projects that demanded his extra involvement which in turn consumed more time than required. His selection to an Ivy League institution made everyone at his workplace insecure. He was regularly taunted with disparaging comments. ‘What will you do after studying economics, which is not your field and different from the work you currently do?’

One of the limitations of the Indian Constitution often echoed within Dalit circles is the absolute visionary absence of Dalit pride and the eruptive definition of liberation. Constitutionalism has proved to be an unreliable doctrine to influence perpetrators of casteism. The landmark case of *Surya Narayan Chaudhury v. State of Rajasthan* in 1988 ex-

poses one among its many limitations. This case prohibited temples from discriminating against Dalits' right to worship and enter the sacrosanct spaces as a rule of law.

The verdict delivered by the Chief Justice of India, Justice J.S. Verma, pointed out the fact that ‘mere enactment of such a law or guaranteeing a right in the Constitution of India is not enough and the change needed is really in our hearts and not elsewhere. It is the willing acceptance of the society which alone is the sure guarantee of eradication of any social evil.’

The Justice J.S. Verma verdict expressed the inadequacies of legal provisions in the absence of society's willingness to acknowledge its prejudices. This goes in line with Ambedkar's comments on the uselessness of legislation in the face of social sanction.

Using Ambedkar

Guarding the elitism of the Constitution and selling it under Ambedkar's name has come at the cost of Dalit radicalism. Ambedkar is now centralised as a sanctimonious figurehead. And in a country like India, to worship someone is to kill any critical thoughts about the person. Various ideological and semi-social and political circles play football with Ambedkar and enjoy the show put on by Dalits around his portraits. Ambedkar's image is used to silence Dalit rage around any issue, to the benefit of the oppressor, who is more than happy to co-opt Ambedkar into their vicious programme of hatred and violence. At the time of writing, every Dalit leader in the 2019 election campaign has spoken of protecting the Constitution. They found it a more appealing idea to attract the common mass towards ‘Samvidhaan’, as opposed to other traditional issues at hand, such as social justice, welfare programmes, education, health, taxation and the protection of the working class. The affection of Dalits towards constitutionalism is a curious subject of inquiry. No mainstream Dalit leader has dared to critically engage with the debate around the Constitution and its encouragement of Dalit passivism.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

The act of verification requires time

The Readers' Editor's office requires effort and expertise to verify arguments and counterarguments



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

What are the issues that a Readers' Editor can address and what are the issues that are beyond his remit? The fine line between acting responsibly and overreach is clear to all the three concerned parties: readers, the editorial staff, and the Readers' Editor. Readers recognise that the Readers' Editor's role is strictly limited to post-publication, but they have an ambiguous idea when it comes to his right to reply.

Time for evaluation

On July 9, *The Hindu* published an article titled “Taking a myopic view of foreign-made generic drugs” by Srividhya Ragavan, Professor of Law at Texas A&M University School of Law, on the opinion page. The article looked at how the U.S. is using the Ranbaxy experience as an excuse to deny access to lifesaving medication to productive workforces. Dinesh Thakur, a public health activist and blogger, wanted the newspaper to publish a rebuttal. He marked it to both the editorial team and the Readers' Editor office on July 10. However, he withdrew his rejoinder on July 12 saying he was disappointed that the editorial team did not indicate whether his article would be published or not. Mr. Thakur failed to recognise the fact that rebuttals need careful analysis. It takes time to examine the points made. Further, it is only fair to check with the original author for her response. The Readers' Editor's office only facilitates a dialogue between the reader and the editorial team, it does not interfere in the editorial selection process. Mr. Thakur withdrew his submission without giving adequate time to the editorial team to either examine his counterarguments or get Ms. Ragavan's response. I request readers to grant us time to carry out due diligence in evaluating complaints. This request for time should not be interpreted as the lack of a proactive outlook.

The Readers' Editor's office acts as an ef-

fective listening post and passes on every alert that comes from readers. There are moments when it acts as an early warning system.

Cause for floods

When parts of north India were flooded last week and this week, Kanak Mani Dixit, founding editor of *Himal Southasian* and a regular contributor to this newspaper, drew our attention to some very important facts. He pointed out that there are no significant dams in Nepal with ‘open sluice gates’ to send floodwaters to Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. He said that the two barrages on rivers Kosi and Gandaki near the India-Nepal border are operated by Indian authorities. And that there is only one relatively small reservoir in Nepal, Kulekhani. For nearly three decades, Indian leaders have been blaming Nepal for floods in north India, especially in Bihar and U.P. Even a statesman like Atal Bihari Vajpayee believed in this allegation. During his 1998 tour of flooded eastern U.P., Vajpayee

remarked in Lucknow that Nepal was responsible for the floods. Most news channels reported that Nepal had released 3,50,000 cusecs from its dams. Ajaya Dixit, a water resources expert and a member of the Nepal Water Conservation Foundation based in Kathmandu, pointed out that the politics of blaming Nepal began in the colonial era when Sir Claude Inglis, the director of the Central Irrigation and Hydrodynamic Research Station at Poona, attributed floods in the Kosi river to hill farmers cutting trees, as early as 1941.

Mr. Dixit explained the causes for floods in the plains of Bihar. He meticulously explained that the real issue is not what is stored upstream but with the drainage congestion downstream. Bihar's embankments stretching over 3,000 km have made more land susceptible to floods than what they were meant to do – provide deliverance from the annual inundation.

Both the cases – one about Indian-made generic drugs and the other about the floods in north India – draw our attention to the act of verification amidst conflicting claims. A Readers' Editor's verdict is an act of validation. It recognises that verification requires not only effort and expertise but also time.

readerseditor@thehindu.co.in



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

A valiant attempt to mainstream the marginalised

The ‘good cop’ in ‘Article 15’ is aware of his privilege

KUNAL RAY

One popular trope in Hindi cinema is that of a ‘good cop’. He regularly performs swashbuckling tricks, takes the rowdies to task and does out justice. Amitabh Bachchan played many of these angry cop roles in the 1970s. In fact, his angry young man image was largely a creation of these films. The cop character was angered by wrongdoings of various kinds but remained oblivious to caste-based injustice.

What has changed, I wonder? Look at Ajay Devgn's cop character in the *Singham* films or Salman Khan's in *Dabangg*. Caste issues don't seem to rattle our filmmakers in Mumbai.

Taking caste head on

In such a scenario, Ayushmann Khurrana's lead character in *Article 15* comes as a welcome change. I don't remember the last time a policeman took caste head on in Hindi cinema. There are very few instances of mainstream Hindi cinema exposing caste-based oppression so eloquently with nuance.

A cop walking over a heap of garbage, entering the swamp with his subordinates, visuals of manual scavenging on screen – it is rare to encounter these moments in Hindi films.

The way director Anubhav Sinha deals with caste issues is different from the approach of, say, Pa. Ranjith, and I think both can coexist. Hindi cinema is riddled with many ills. It can't look beyond the urban, dishes out films that look like soap operas and is lacking in social content. On the other hand, when a Hindi film deals with social issues and lacks a big mainstream lead actor, it is often dismissed as ‘art house’.

These distinctions are facile. Why can't these so-called ‘commercial’ films also glimpse the times we live in? Why do we have to wait for a *Fandry* or a *Court* (both non-Hindi films) to give us the wake-up call?

Nobody can deny the reach of mainstream Hindi cinema and its desired impact. Thus, it becomes im-



perative to widely discuss a film such as *Article 15*, which uses the conventions of the mainstream to discuss the marginal and pushes these conversations into spaces where they matter the most.

Set in rural Uttar Pradesh, *Article 15* takes a clear position on caste-based crimes, untouchability and other associated social ostracisation practices that keep Dalits invisible and crush all their attempts at mobilising themselves and taking on the powers that be.

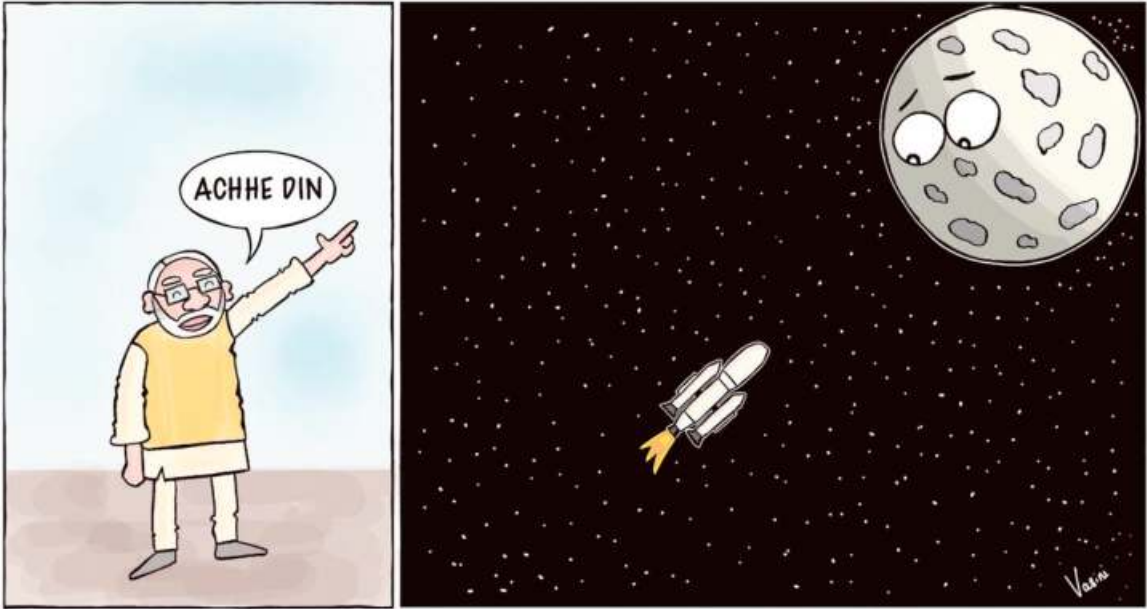
The Ambedkar reference

The film opens with a song which vocalises the wide chasm that exists. Immediately thereafter appears a familiar statue of B.R. Ambedkar in his trademark blue coat with his hand raised and holding a copy of the Constitution. Some might dismiss this as a tokenistic measure, but I believe it is of great significance. The song and the statue create an iconography that mere words cannot capture.

I still remember the concluding scenes from Pa. Ranjith's *Kaala* and his effective use of the colour blue that takes over the screen. It is rife with suggestions and cinema, after all, is an image-based medium. The events depicted in such films are common knowledge, but they attain a renewed vigour on screen. This is where cinema fulfils its role as a watch-keeper in democracy.

In *Article 15*, the ‘good cop’ breaks barriers and leads by example. He is not merely sympathetic but also reminds us that any form of discrimination is anti-constitutional. At the same time, he is acutely aware of his own privilege and upbringing. He finds his own ignorance troubling. Lest we forget, a vulnerable male lead is not a Hindi cinema favourite. In these times of increasing jingoism, every attempt such as *Article 15* inspires hope, because cinema must provoke us to think and act.

The writer teaches literary & cultural studies at FLAME University, Pune



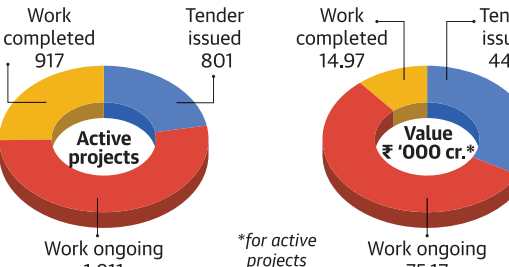
DATA POINT

Far from smart

In June 2015, the Centre launched the ‘100 Smart Cities Mission’. These cities were supposed to have better infrastructure, expand housing to all, and develop open spaces, among other things. Five years on, a large chunk of the earmarked money has not been spent. Several smart cities are yet to complete a single project. By **Varun B. Krishnan**

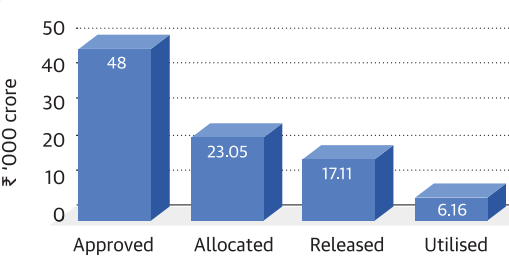
Status update

Of the 5,151 projects initially proposed, only 3,629 have been actively pursued. Of these, about 25% of the projects have been completed. But in value terms, the share of work completed amounts to just 11% of the total



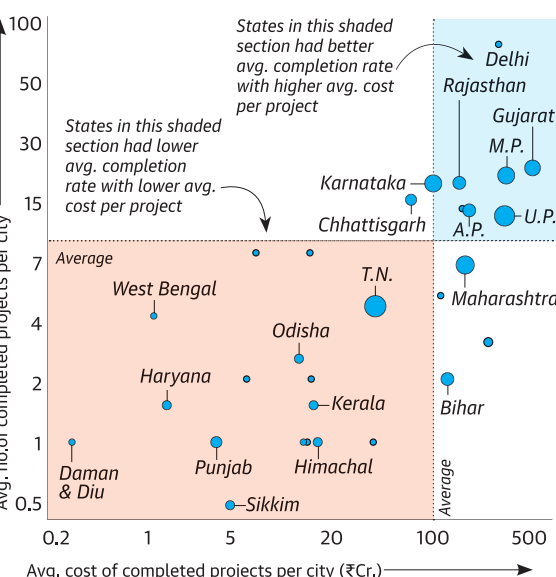
Trickle down effect

Though ₹48,000 cr. is the total approved budget between 2015 and 2019, just half of that has been allocated till now. Of the allocated funds only three-fourth has been released and just 36% of the funds released have been utilised



Where States stand

Each circle represents a State. The size of the circle indicates the number of smart cities in that State – the bigger the circle, the higher the number of the smart cities. Delhi, and cities in Gujarat and M.P., had a better project completion rate on an average, while cities in Punjab and Haryana were among the worst



28 No. of cities which haven't completed a single project

14 No. of cities which have completed just one project

Source: Parliament Question Hour

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 15, 1969

Six lakh people affected by floods

The flood situation in Upper Assam worsened to-day [July 14] following a major breach in the embankment of the Desang river. According to official information reaching here [Gauhati], about 4,000 people in four villages have lost their homes as a result of the breach. Road communication between Dibrugarh and the rest of the State remained suspended for the fourth day to-day. The entire Sibsagar sub-division is in the grip of floods and about 6,00,000 people have been affected, according to district authorities. Sali seedlings in about 8,000 bighas of land and other crops in an area of 10,000 bighas have been badly damaged. The swollen Desang has inundated parts of the Sibsagar town and nearby areas. The entire Wakati Mauja and a part of Thowra Mauja are under water. About a hundred granaries in Bakata have also been flooded. In all, about 200 villages in the sub-division have been inundated. Train communication between Simaluguri and Moran has been suspended following the submersion of the railway track.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 15, 1919.

A Sensational Murder.

[In the Madras High Court on July 14, 1919, before Sadasiva Iyer and Burn J.J.] Dr. Swaminathan with Mr. S. Ranganatha Aiyar argued a referred trial and criminal appeal from the conviction and sentence of death passed by the Sessions Judge of Ramnad on Tharasaya Thevan and four others for the murder of S.P. Allapitchai Rowther, a wealthy merchant of Pudukutam, Ramnad district, and a member of the Taluk Board. The prosecution case was that the deceased was going from Pudukutam to catch the Rameswaram Express at Butchupatti Railway Station when the accused waylaid him, from his dog cart, took him to the Railway line, beat him and tied him to the rails and cut his neck with a bill hook. Very soon the train passed over his body and cut it to pieces. The motive alleged was that the deceased was in execution of a decree against the accused attached all their properties and started criminal proceedings against them alleging that a forged document had been filed by the accused in the course of the suit. Mr. E.R. Osborne appeared in support of the conviction. Their Lordships acquitted the fifth accused as there was not sufficient evidence to justify his conviction and confirmed the conviction of the first four accused.